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30 Teenagers, 7 Short Movies, 1 Dream of Peace

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THE organizers of this summer's Peace It Together Camp here never expected it would be easy to bring together 10 Israeli, 10 Palestinian and 10 Canadian teenagers to make several short films in a spirit of dialogue and collaboration. But they also never expected to do so in a time of war.

The conflict erupted in Lebanon just two weeks before the youths arrived on this gulf island on Canada's west coast. "There were some sleepless nights," acknowledged Adri Hamael, co-executive director of this 18-day event, arranged by the Creative Peace Network. "Suddenly the Middle East looked like it was on fire. If bombs are dropping on people's heads, they tend not to be in a very generous mood. When violence escalates, people become more polarized and skeptical about programs like this one. But I had faith that we would make it happen. Canceling really wasn't an option."

Gathering young Israelis and Palestinians in a safe environment as a means of breaking down barriers is not a new idea. Several charitable organizations undertake such efforts annually in North America, and one such meeting was captured in the Oscar-nominated 2001 feature-length documentary ["Promises."](#)

But the Creative Peace Network, which had organized a previous peace camp in Vancouver, British Columbia, in 2004, decided to use filmmaking as a way to promote cross-cultural understanding and cooperation after being approached by the Gulf Island Film and Television School. In early August the 30 adolescents arrived from Israel, the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, and Canada to get to know one another while creating a series of short films. "Our point has always been to use dialogue and creativity as a means of breaking down barriers and changing lives," Mr. Hamael said.

The students, all between 15 and 17, were chosen by regional coordinators. Thanks to private donations, their travel and living expenses were subsidized. A small tuition of \$400 was required of each participant.

On arrival the students were broken down into seven groups to work in either animated, documentary or dramatic filmmaking. Each group was assigned an adult mentor to help with brainstorming sessions, screenwriting and technical matters. Each morning the teenagers met to exchange views about their lives and the Middle East conflict; in the afternoons they worked on their films. The idea was that the discussions would be enhanced by the collaborative effort of moviemaking.

Ala'a Abu Dawoud, a 17-year-old Palestinian from the northern Israeli town of Majd Al-Kurum, said the camp was an extremely difficult place to be at times. "Sometimes I feel like crying," she said during an

interview here. “Sometimes I feel I’ve done the wrong thing by coming here. Sometimes it’s hard to rethink the things we’ve been told and the things we see on the news every day. But I realized over time that I was having fun with the Jewish people who were here. And now we’ve become friends.”

For Ms. Dawoud and the others, the filmmaking process helped to bring them together. “I thought it would be so complicated,” she said. “But because we’re doing something I really love, and because we’re showing the conflict in a different way through our eyes, the act of making the film has been really fascinating.”

Not surprisingly, exchanges could occasionally prove acrimonious. “Some people might see this as a feel-good project, but it can be very intense,” Mr. Hamael said. “The youth who are here are a product of violence. They are born either under occupation or under the threat of violence. They come with emotional baggage.”

While the topics of the seven films were varied, they shared themes of promoting peace and conflict resolution. In the five-minute documentary “Sweet Like Chocolate,” several teenagers describe what they think peace would feel, sound and taste like. In the seven-minute drama “No Place for Dreamers,” a Palestinian man and an Israeli woman find it impossible to continue their budding romance because of a roadblock that a checkpoint places between them. In the film’s conclusion the despondent woman looks through a fence as Israeli soldiers tell the Palestinian man that he cannot pass through to the other side.

Part of the inspiration for “On the Line,” a combination of documentary and drama, came after one of the Israeli youths, Nir Ayalon, revealed to the other teenagers that he would serve in the Israeli military next year. “There were some faces made when I told them,” Mr. Ayalon, 17, acknowledged. “But I will not be serving in a combat capacity, so there’s no way I’m going to be shooting at anyone.”

The film depicts Mr. Ayalon’s friendship with one of the Palestinian teenagers at the camp, but concludes ambiguously with a fantasy sequence in which the two meet up again, in 2008, when Mr. Ayalon has become an Israeli soldier manning a checkpoint.

Alternately sweet and bitter, the films by the teenagers at times seem naïve, until one considers that the Israel and Palestinian youths face very real threats of violence, and that their scenarios are all rooted in that reality.

The camp’s organizers have said they hoped to screen the anthology of seven films on the film festival circuit. “I feel we have made an impact,” Mr. Hamael said. “Even if that is a limited impact, it is something nonetheless. Governments spend billions of dollars every year on the possibility of war. We are trying to spend something on the possibility of peace.”

David Ozier, a Vancouver filmmaker who worked as a mentor, said those who attended appeared to be affected by the experience. “Both the Palestinian and Israeli teenagers learned to work together and formed some very strong friendships,” Mr. Ozier said. “True to stereotype, the Canadian kids were often the ones who were filling a diplomatic role when there was conflict.”

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